

The Corridor Paradigm and Rail Advocacy: Rail Is “Real” Breaks Through

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Rail Is Real 

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*Rail Is Real*Ô

My thanks to Joseph Brooks and Dan Lysy, for inviting me to be here today. It is indeed an honor. It is indeed an honor to be here, because organizations like this one are working all over America, in the greatest revival of rail service this country has ever seen. And its not about being anti-car. It's being pro-balanced transportation . And what I think is wonderful is the bi-partisan nature of this effort, not only here, but everywhere I go. You here in Richmond are part of a great and very typically American grassroots, bootstrap effort which I can tell you from personal experience is growing like wildfire. How can I tell? I've had to make five speeches in the past three weeks alone.

Not so very long ago the primary objective of any serious rail advocate was quite simply to fight an essentially rearguard action for the sheer survival of the nation's passenger rail network, in some form that at least roughly approximated a true national intercity system, even as its size and scope continued to shrink. But this is not about going back to the good old days, or anything like that. Our fight is about the future, and in this case the future of a very beautiful but impacted place, Virginia and the Virginia-Washington Corridor. And while I am a resident of

Boston and a native of New Orleans, I feel very much at home here with you today, because my forefather, a Swiss named John Jacob RePass, settled in Virginia in about 1765, and was minister to a small church in Wytheville.

But as nice as Virginia is, and as Virginian's are, I do want to leave you with one particular thought today, in regard your fight to create high speed rail in the Richmond-Washington Corridor: Don't be afraid to be unreasonable.

Let me illustrate by talking a little bit about the National Corridor Initiative's advocacy for rail, and the role of the advocate in supporting rail; about why we are a corridor-based and not a technology-based organization and why that is important; and about why the role of the corridor movement has in my view been essential to the creation of the new and very robust future for passenger rail that we now can see for America. And I especially want to invite each of you to come to our conference June 26-27 in Washington, DC, "The National Corridors Movement: Rail Is Real", and hear Governor Tommy Thompson, American Public Transportation Association's Bill Millar, Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, Amtrak Vice Chair Mike Dukakis, and others, and see the introduction of the first national public affairs campaign for rail --- both freight and passenger --- in American history.

The original name of our organization was the Northeast Corridor Initiative, and it was founded in April 1989 because I got stuck in a plane one time too many.

Let me explain myself, and tell you who I am by first telling you who I am not. I am not a rail buff or rail fan, although I have come to know a few and they are perfectly nice people. But that is not what I am.

I am also not a technology buff. Although I certainly have come to understand the various rail and uber-rail technologies and how they might or might not apply to solving the nation's ground transportation problem, I am or at least was fundamentally just a businessman. And there were two incidents in my life that turned me into an advocate for rail, and made me want to spend the rest of my life working to improve what I have come to understand as the last, best hope of ever building a balanced American transportation system.

There are two incidents, highly personal, I wish to relate.

In the Summer of 1988 I was sailing on Massachusetts Bay on the very nice sailing yacht of one of my clients, the regional manager of a very large energy company. This was back in the days when I still had clients, and an income, rather than a cause, and no income!!

My friend had assigned me an important role in this particular sailing excursion, which was to be what he called "ballast", a role I was apparently performing satisfactorily that sunny afternoon. Both the water and the sky over Massachusetts Bay were a deep, azure blue that day, and as we sailed East we enjoyed the sound of the wind, and the slap of the waves on the bow of my friend's 32-footer.

We were sufficiently far enough out into Massachusetts Bay that the horizon was very far away, the curve of the earth was discernible. And then we tacked to head West, and as we came about we saw a sight I will never forget. Far away and almost suspended in mid air appeared not the city of Boston, but just the very spires of its skyscrapers --- but instead of the azure blue sky we had seen sailing

East, the spires were surrounded by an ugly yellow donut of haze and ash, as stark as you can imagine, the color of – forgive me for saying this --- smoker’s spit.

Our eyes locked, and at that same moment I said to my friend, “We’re breathing *that???*”

I looked at that mess, then at the sky around me, and right there I decided I wanted to do something --- I was not sure what --- to replace that yellow donut of haze with something better. As we sailed home that evening, I looked around me, and just knew we could do a better job of stewardship, if you will, of our earth.

The second incident triggered my action-item from the first.

Back in April of 1989, making my living as a management consultant for small high-tech start-ups, I had to travel around the Northeast a great deal. As such, I was a frequent flyer. In my case I made a special effort to get home every night, even from distant cities, because back in 1989 I was a new Dad, with a very active 2 year old. I had memories of my own childhood, as many new Dads do, and I recalled how little I had seen of my own father when I was a kid – that was just they way it was back then, and as it is for many still today, but I vowed that my kid would see me even if I had to day-trip to Dallas.

When T.S. Eliot wrote that “April is the cruelest month” I think he must have been thinking about Spring in New England, because that is the time in the Northeast when getting home by plane can be a real adventure: you can have six kinds of weather at Logan Airport in Boston all within just a few minutes. I used to

think people were kidding me when they said about New England, “If you don’t like the weather stick around a few minutes. It will change” --- but it’s true.

This particular day had started out sunny, and as I only had to fly down to New Jersey, I told my son that Daddy would be home in time to tuck him in bed and kiss him good night. That afternoon I returned to Newark Airport for my flight home, and with clear skies we took off right on time. It was exactly 5 p.m. and the day was going well...too well as it turned out, because just a few minutes after we leveled off --- remember, this is a one hour flight once you’re in the air ---the pilot came on the plane’s intercom in that certified Georgia accent that is required of all airline pilots and, oddly enough, truck drivers, and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m afraid we’ve got us a little *weather* up in Boston, so we’re gonna have to circle Praaaahhhvidence fo’ awhile.”

As the plane of mostly businessmen collectively groaned resignedly I looked out the window and saw the sky ahead darkening ominously. Sure enough, we did indeed have to circle “Praaaahhhvidence” for awhile. Boston was getting so fogged in that Logan Airport got shut tight. Finally, they landed us at Providence...found us a bus...and *bused* us past my house to Logan to get my car..

To make a really long story short, it took me six hours to get home, my little boy was of course sound asleep, and worst of all, his Daddy had told him he’d be home by bedtime *and he didn’t keep his word*. Now I know some of you are Dads also, so you’ll understand when I say, “Two-year-olds don’t understand weather delays” and my son was no exception.

In desperation to find some other means of New England transport, I looked at the train schedule. And that’s when I really got mad. Steamed up. To put it mildly,

irate. Because, even though I could see from the schedule that it was only 231 miles to Boston from New York the trip took *five hours* --- inexcusable. I knew as a businessman I could never justify a 10 hours in a train for a 1`-hour meeting in Manhattan – yet as a seasoned flyer I also knew that once every two or three air trips, I`d break my promise to my kid again. The more I thought about that, the madder I got. And the madder I got, the more determined I was to do something about it.

So the next day, I called the Chairman of the Board of Amtrak, Graham Claytor. I know, I know, it was a very pushy thing to do, and very unlike me..... But I called him and got him on the line, and more or less demanded to know, “Mr. Claytor, why are your trains so slow?”

I recounted the story of the six hour air flight, and then him asked why his trains took almost that amount of time to go the same distance, averaging about 40 miles an hour in an era when even a car could average 70 --- or higher, if I was in a hurry...

Graham Claytor listened patiently, and then, wonderful Southern gentlemen that he was, explained to me just why it was that Amtrak`s New York-Boston trains took five hours to cover a distance that I could drive in three or fly in one in the first place, he explained – and some of you know this of course --- the track was not electrified beyond New Haven, so that each train to Boston had to switch to diesel locomotives. Secondly, diesels can`t accelerate or decelerate as quickly as electric locomotives such as those used South of New Haven down to New York City and on to Washington, so time was lost there; finally, the track needed work, with many curves, some of which could be straightened at least to some degree, so that better average speeds could be reached. With such improvements, 3-hour travel, competitive with air on a city-center to city-center basis, was easily

possible. How much? About \$500 million for the basic electrification job, said Claytor, although he added that European technology had made significant advances in catenary design and installation, and that costs per track mile had dropped almost in half over in Europe.

“So why not electrify?” I asked Claytor, wondering why it hadn’t been done. In the scale of public works projects, where a single highway interchange can cost several hundred million dollars, \$500 million didn’t sound insurmountable. “Because Congress won’t give me the money!” responded Mr. Claytor.

“Okay, I said, “Then I’ll get you the money.”

Now you’ll have to understand that there was a silence at the other end of the telephone line. A perfect stranger had just told the former Secretary of the Navy, who had one or two friends in Congress himself, that he, unknown businessman, was going to do what 50 years of savvy business management and politicking couldn’t achieve: get the Northeast Corridor electrified.

“Look,” I explained, “I have a bunch of friends in the utility business in New England. *They’d* sell the juice if you electrified. Seems to me they ought to get off their duffs and help you get the money out of Congress.”

“Sounds good to me” said the ever gentlemanly Mr. Claytor.

So instead of hanging up on me, which he probably should have done, he sent his car the Beech Grove, the office car of Amtrak’s executives, to Boston for me, along with almost all of Amtrak’s vice presidents, and with his personal staff. I in turn invited the Chief Executive Officers of the largest New England utilities to have dinner with us, the theory being that no CEO can resist dinner in a private railroad car. The theory turned out to be true, because all of them came (with one exception, and he sent his #2 guy) so we had a pretty fair turnout. And after the

best dinner these guys had ever had, and about a case of wine [each] we all decided that this was just about the best project on the face of the earth, and we, meaning yours truly, was deputized to do something about it.

That was December of 1989. Over the next few months, we put together a deliberately bi-partisan group of business executives, former elected officials, and environmentalists, and I want to stop here for a moment and talk about bi-partisanship.

I think one of the most important decisions we made, when we were trying to figure out how to get the Northeast Corridor project off the dime, was to ensure that whatever we did, we had folks from both sides of the aisle on board. All that was required was a commitment to either economic development or environmentalism --- and they are not at all mutually exclusive, by the way --- and that we could all work together for the benefit of our region. That decision helped us time and time again, because we learned pretty early on that while most people support, at least in theory, the idea of better rail service, it simply isn't high up the list. Why not? Lot's of reasons, mostly having to do with inertia and the status quo. But having folks from both sides of the aisle in our organization turned out to be a powerful tool for access. And in politics and policy, without access, you've got nothing.

And the first access we exercised, in our attempt to kick start rail in New England, was the White House.

Now I know that sounds a bit well, arrogant, but it was really luck – and bi-partisanship of a different sort --- that got us in the door to make our case.

It so happened one day in 1990 that one of our board members, the former Governor of Rhode Island Joe Garrahy, a Democrat, was attending a fund-raiser for Democrat Congressional candidates Congress when, low and behold, the Bush Administration's Office of Management and Budget Director Dick Darman walked in. As our Board member knew this fellow from many White House visits as Governor, he laughed and asked what on earth a top Republican appointee was doing at a Democratic fund-raiser in Rhode Island.

As it so often turns out in politics, things are seldom what they seem— and rather than a high-level “fraternizing with the enemy” incident, the Republican OMB chief was merely visiting an old college chum --- who happened to be running for Congress as a Democrat.

“So what are you up to now, Governor?” asked Darman, since he knew Governor Garrahy had not sought reelection.

“Well, Dick,” replied the Governor, “We’re trying to get the Northeast Corridor project re-started, but you keep stopping it.”

“What’s the ‘Northeast Corridor Project?’” asked Darman.

It wasn’t even on his radar screen! The Governor explained that there was a \$125 million authorization for the electrification of the Northeast Corridor – enough to get the project rolling again --- left over from the Carter Administration, but that each time the Democrat-controlled Congress had tried to appropriate the money, the White House would block it.

The next thing I knew, I was getting a call from Joe Garrahy. “Get your hair cut and your suit pressed. You’re going down to the White House.”

And so down we went, Joe Garrahy, myself, our then-executive director Lincoln Chafee who is now Senator Chafee from Rhode Island, New York Power Authority Chair Dick Flynn, and George Bush’s top fundraiser from the 1988 New

Hampshire primary, Bob Pullman. I must say it was a stellar bunch, but with Bob in the room, we got their undivided attention.

It took three meetings, but finally, Janet Hale, Dick Darman's deputy for transportation, turned to us on September 21, 1991, and said, "Okay, okay, we aren't going to parade in the street with signs for trains, but no more body blocks."

"That's all we want," I replied, and within two weeks Senators Lautenberg and Moynihan were able without serious opposition to put the \$125 million that had been authorized 10 years before, but not appropriated, into the budget.

I called Graham Claytor to see how it would be allocated. "Don't worry Jim, I've already spent it," he told me happily, saying that it would be used for the design engineering needed to get the project going.

Since that time the progress on the Northeast Corridor went forward aggressively. In 1992 Congress appropriated \$155M, the next year \$168M, the year after that \$199.5M and so on, until finally we began to get up into Everett Dirksen territory. And it looked to me that, as bad as things looked for the national system right then, at least the Northeast Corridor Project was going forward. So then it was about mid-1994 that I began looking around the country for other folks like us in the Northeast who might be trying to do, in their regions, what we were doing in ours. And lo and behold, much to my surprise, I found a lot of them: in the Pacific Northwest, with the Discovery Institute's Cascadia Project; in the Midwest, with the Environmental Law and Policy Center's Midwest regional Rail Initiative; in the Deep South at the Southern Rapid Rail Commission; in Texas as the Texas Eagle Mayors fought to save their train, and build upon it; in Virginia, in the Carolinas, in Upstate New York --- on and on and on, and yet not a peep of national news coverage which to me, as an ex-newsmen in my youth, seemed like a terrific story: The revival, against all odds and more money, of what was once the greatest rail

system in the world --- and what will be, and I am here to tell you this, what will be the greatest rail system in the world once again.

How did the Northeast Corridor Initiative turn into the National Corridors Initiative? Officially, it started with a conference on the edge of Narragansett Bay. In 1996, after two years of organizing effort. So, a little history...

II. The Corridor Movement and Making Rail 'Real': Fighting Towards Victory

The long-term disinvestment in the American passenger rail system which had begun in earnest during the 1960's collapse of the heavily-regulated investor-owned railroads was supposed to end with the creation of Amtrak in 1970, but in fact that situation got progressively worse.

Fighting to stem ever-widening operating losses brought about in large measure by forced reliance upon antiquated equipment and a deteriorating physical plant, and denied the capital investment that Congress had promised when creating the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, Amtrak repeatedly pruned ---some would say chain-sawed --- it's route system to the point where train service to important cities, like Nashville or Tulsa or Columbus, disappeared entirely, and other cities were reduced to one train a day in each direction, often at odd hours of the night --- such as Cleveland at 4 a.m. or Cincinnati at dawn. And of course, reliability was nil. If there was any publicity at all about rail travel, it was negative.

And so in the early 1990's rail advocates of every kind seemed to be fighting a losing battle. Outside of the Northeast Corridor, where a long-stalled Federally-financed electrification plan was at last back on track due in large part to efforts by

citizen-activists such as the National Association of Rail Passengers and the Northeast Corridor Initiative (NCI's predecessor), and perhaps California, the very survival of passenger rail looked highly problematic. Despite progressive service cutbacks during the deficit-ridden 1980's and early 1990's, by 1994 Amtrak had become the poster boy for government waste and inefficiency, and a favorite target of campaigning politicians, especially among those on the right.

That's when things got worse.

If the cliché says it is always darkest before the dawn, then it must have been just about pitch black from Amtrak's perspective when the 1994 Congressional elections came along. While targeting wasteful government programs wherever they could be found, and playing upon the often legitimate fears of an increasingly alienated middle class male voter that the world was turning away from them and soon would cast them to the wolves, North and South of the border, of the NAFTA agreement, the GOP and its Contract With America struck a deep chord that carried the Republican Party to power in both houses of Congress for the first time in more than 40 years, and literally for the first time within the living memory of more than half of all Americans.

The Amtrak Board of Directors in 1994 was watching all of this carefully, and when the GOP swept to power with many vocal Amtrak critics in leadership roles, it decided rather than to await execution, it would commit suicide.

It did this by enacting the most drastic route- and frequency-reduction program in its history. Acting upon the recommendations of a private consulting firm, Mercer Management, which had been retained to help reduce Amtrak's expenses. So,

when in late 1994, hemorrhaging cash, the Amtrak Board faced yet another in the company's long history of financial crises, it acted to adapt the Mercer recommendations. And they stopped at nothing. Whole systems were shut down, and even Amtrak's best trains, such as the New Orleans-New York *Crescent*, were cut from daily service to three times a week.

Down in Meridian, Mississippi, a new mayor had been basing the revival of his small city's downtown around the rebuilding of that city's historic depot and railroad district. And suddenly, he wasn't likely to have very many trains showing up at the new station. And just as quickly, his political opponents hastened to start using the word "folly" in association with those plans.

That is when, in late 1994, Mayor John Robert Smith got on the telephone to new Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi. "I sent you to Washington, Trent. Trent, what did you do to my trains, Trent?"

And Trent Lott replied, "What trains were those, John Robert?"

It didn't take long for the Senate Majority Leader to get on the phone to Amtrak's then-President, Tom Downs, and say, "Mr. Downs, I just want you to know, if there's no money for trains in Mississippi, then there is no money for trains on the

About five minutes later, up in Boston, tooling along in high gear in support of the Northeast Corridor Project, I heard about that call. And just as quickly, I got on the telephone to Mayor John Robert Smith of Meridian, Mississippi, and I said, Mayor

Smith, this is Jim RePass calling from Boston, Massachusetts, and you and I are going to become best friends.”

Funny thing is, we have. And John Robert Smith is today not only still Mayor of Meridian, MS, with a bright political future ahead of him. He was also appointed to the Amtrak Board of Directors by the President in 1998, one year after he became Chairman of the National Corridors Initiative.

III. Making Rail Real

What happened that day in early 1995 was in a way the culmination of all we have worked for. As we began to learn of other corridor-based regional organizations, we began to see the need to pull them together into a national network so that we could begin to share information and strategies, to learn from each other what had worked, and what hadn't, in each of the regions where ordinary citizens, state legislators, and, as time went by, even Governors began to organize around the same principle by which we organized the Northeast Corridor: bipartisanship, and common ground.

And this new day began to dawn with great clarity when I first spoke with John Robert Smith.

What I learned that day in late 1994 that in John Robert I had not a rival but an ally, and that the Northeast Corridor needed to expand its world view AT ONCE. And we did so, thanks in large part to a conference organized by Amtrak at the direction of Sen. Majority Leader Trent Lott.

What Sen. Lott did, when he insisted that if there were no money for trains in Mississippi, then there was no money for the Northeast Corridor, was to force the first national assessment of the future of passenger rail since the formation of Amtrak in 1970.

In May of 1995, following six regional meetings around the country, 21 rail experts and advocates from across the United States met at a hotel near the BWI Airport Rail Station, and organized themselves into the National Forum for the Future of Passenger Rail. Electing John Robert Smith our chairman, we met to hammer out a plan 1) whether there was a place for a national, intercity rail system and 2) whether that plan could in some way be funded.

Working intensely for two days, with yours truly as editor, we drafted a report that Chairman Smith transmitted to Sen. Lott. This report, along with legislative efforts by Senators Roth of Delaware, Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, John Kerry of Massachusetts, Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey and Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, and others, two years later became the basis for the Amtrak Reform Act of 1997.

And in the meantime, to carry the message forward, we organized. In 1996 we held the first National Corridors Initiative Conference, “Re-Inventing the Land Grant”, and gathered advocates from regions around the country who were just as determined as we were to make rail happen.

Since that time, NCI has held a series of national and regional conferences, written scores of articles and op ed pieces, acted as a guest or story source on CNN,

National Public Radio, The New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal, and been a resource to journalists and political leaders on the issue of rail in America. What does effective advocacy entail? Being reasonable, and practical, and above all honest in the pursuit of rail development, and especially, avoiding grandiose schemes that might entice a politician, but which ultimately will discredit the movement for rail. Above all, I believe we must communicate the message that “Rail Is Real™”, and that the regional rail initiatives which we began in 1989, and the national corridors program which we began in 1994 and which Washington-based organizations such as the High Speed Ground Transportation Association began to adopt in 1998, deserve serious consideration by Congress.

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I’d like to conclude by telling you: we are at the breakpoint, at last. The game has been rigged against rail for decades, but through the kind of hard-slogging I just told you about, by us and by people like the National Association of Rail Passengers and innovative outfits like those that are sponsoring this even, a foundation has been put down that has a chance of enduring.

And today there is one truly major difference between today, and days past, and the people in this room know this better than most: the Internet. I believe it to be the greatest force for democracy in the history of man, and I tell you it is the weapon we can use to level that playing field now dominated by the highway lobby, and get the story out that Rail Is Real, a viable option that has so many benefits, and so few drawbacks, that we would be foolish not to take advantage of it. We have gotten this far with next to nothing, monetarily, while the highway boys have spent literally billions conditioning the American people, and in particular the media, to think that support for rail is a nostalgic throw-back to an

obsolete technology, when in Europe and Japan, as some of us know, rail is at the forefront of travel technology.

I know that the highway lobby can buy ads in the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times for half a million dollars, and we can't. But I can do something about that now. I can reach half a million people --- or more ---- with a click of the mouse. And THAT is the great leveler we have today.

To assemble a real assault, to penetrate the public's consciousness, we need to use that tool, and in an organized way. That takes money. And although we have received a small grant from the Surdna Foundation to lay the groundwork for an Internet-based assault in favor of balanced transportation, a sustained professional effort will take a budget of about \$1 million a year. To do that, I am seeking to establish an endowment for NCI of \$20 million, and I am going to ask those of you in this room who understand philanthropy and foundations to help us in this quest.

Look at what we have done with next to NO money. Imagine what we can do if you help. A healthy, balanced transportation system in a healthy, prosperous environment that's what I have decided to give my life to. And I wish you the greatest success in Richmond, as you begin to reconnect this beautiful city to the rest of America by a transportation system that will be a legacy we can tell our kids about, and that they would get to see, and use, every day. And that would be wonderful.

Thanks, and I hope to see you in DC June 26-27 at "Rail Is Real"!